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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KIRF BO
SUBJECT: REGIME STRENGTHENS RESTRICTIONS ON FOREIGN CLERGY

Ref: 07 MINSK 484

Summary

¶1. The GOB has introduced stringent procedures for Belarusian
religious associations that invite foreign clergy to work in
Belarus. The Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and
Nationality Affairs (PRRNA) that authorizes foreign religious
workers' activities now has the right to deny requests without
explanation. The Belarusian Orthodox Church is believed to have
actively supported the regulations, which will largely affect the
Roman Catholic Church and could limit humanitarian activities of
Protestants, which the GOB considers "foreign." End summary.

New Regulations Limit Foreign Clergy

¶2. The GOB introduced new regulations January 30 to "streamline"
procedures for registered religious groups planning to invite
foreign clergy for religious work in Belarus. The new provisions
state that only registered associations consisting of ten or more
communities, at least one of which must have functioned in Belarus
for at least 20 years, have the right to apply to the PRRNA for
authorization to invite foreign religious workers. Workers covered
under the provision are those who wish to enter Belarus for the
following purposes: to serve as clergy; to teach or study at
religious institutions; to participate in charitable and other mass
religious events; and/or to initiate or expand foreign contacts of
religious groups. Foreign clergy can stay in Belarus for one year,
and the PRRNA can reduce the term of any visit if it decides that
less time is required to fulfill the purposes of a foreigner's work.
 The PRRNA can also extend the term upon request.

¶3. In an application to be filed with the PRRNA at least one month
prior to a foreign worker's date of arrival, religious groups must
provide biographical data, the purpose of the visit, length of stay,
and detailed justification for the religious worker's proposed
activities in Belarus. Foreign clergy must also present
certificates of formal religious education, documented work
experience as clergy, and proof of Belarusian or Russian language
fluency required to conduct religious activities. The only types of
religious activities not subject to the language and work experience
requirements are establishing foreign religious contacts or
participating in mass religious events.

¶4. The PRRNA has one month to respond to applications, and even
after approval may reduce a term of a foreigner's stay. The PRRNA
assesses the necessity of a foreign religious worker's presence in

Belarus and is not required to cite reasons for denial. The
regulations state that foreign clergy can be officially refused for
providing fraudulent information, for insufficient command of the
Russian or Belarusian language, for administrative violations during
previous stays in Belarus, or due to an imposed travel ban. Foreign
clergy are not allowed to participate in religious activities
outside the geographical area of their sponsoring religious group's
registration. The transfer of a foreign religious worker from one
parish or community to another requires official permission, even
for a single worship service. Religious groups must register
foreign religious workers within three days of arrival with the
local authorities and the relevant citizenship and migration agency.

¶5. In an interview with Radio Liberty February 7, PRRNA
Spokesperson Mikhail Rybakov emphasized that a religious association
"must justify" the need for a foreign religious worker to come to
Belarus, and that authorization procedures are "accurate,
comprehensive, and transparent." Assistant to the PRRNA Vladimir
Lameko admitted that the application procedure became "stricter,"
and that the PRRNA's office was given more responsibility for taking
decisions. He also confirmed that unspecified denials "could
happen" as "there are always reasons," including "state secrets,"
adding that such denials are common practice in many countries.
Deputy Premier Aleksandr Kosinets stressed at a September 19, 2007,
roundtable that the Catholic Church should end the use of foreign
clergy over the next few years.

Lawyers for Churches Oppose New Regulations

¶6. Lawyers for religious communities maintain that the new,
stricter rules are a reaction to an increase in the number of Polish
Catholic priests working throughout Belarus and follow the
deportation of Protestant pastors and Catholic priests for
purportedly presenting a threat to national security (reftel).
Minsk-based Protestant lawyer Dina Shavtsova suggested that refusal
of visas without explanation remains "a widespread practice."
Moreover, she indicated that a lack of consistency would result in
more selective and biased application of the law since "different
religions have different criteria" for language and education
proficiency.

Comment

¶7. The GOB has taken yet another repressive step to formalize its
sweeping control over religious activities. The new regulations are
inconsistent with the 2002 Religion Law that expressly permits
religious organizations to invite foreigners for religious purposes.
 The GOB-supported Belarusian Orthodox Church is rumored to have
strongly promoted introduction of the regulations. Moreover, the
rules controlling foreign religious workers are in addition to the
existing visa regime and decisions cannot be appealed. The
imposition of these restrictions is likely to result in a
significant reduction of the number of foreign missionaries active
in Belarus and a decline in the humanitarian and charitable projects
funded by Western Protestant congregations.

Stewart